

## Circumcision - Demonic Practice or Theological Covenant

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The practice of circumcision has its origins in a popular belief stemming from the fear of demons that would appear during long journeys, especially in a terrifying desert. It is, in fact, a form of protection against demons who would attack uncircumcised adults before their departure on a journey. An example of this demonic practice can be found in the episode from the book of Exodus called "the bridegroom of blood," which deals with the late circumcision of Moses by his wife Sephora (Chapter 4, verses 24 to 26). The author of this account describes Moses' journey from his father-in-law's house in Midian to Egypt to meet his brothers. Yahweh's decision to kill Moses can only be explained when Sephora decides to "cut off his foreskin" (and not "the foreskin of her son") to save her husband from death.



The mother saying to her son the phrase "for you are a husband of blood to me" is meaningless, as it is addressed to a child. The word "husband" refers to an adult, not a child, and also alludes to marriage or the blood of virginity. From this, it can be concluded that circumcision is linked to male virginity and was performed before marriage. Even the use of the word "son" to save the father from death seems nonsensical. The solution I propose is to remove the word "בנה"

(her son) and replace it with the word "עֶרְלָתוֹ" (his foreskin, that of Moses) with only one letter difference, making the narrative more coherent. The replacement of Moses' foreskin with that of his son in the text was likely done at a later time when the circumcision of newborns on the eighth day became a covenant between Yahweh and his people.

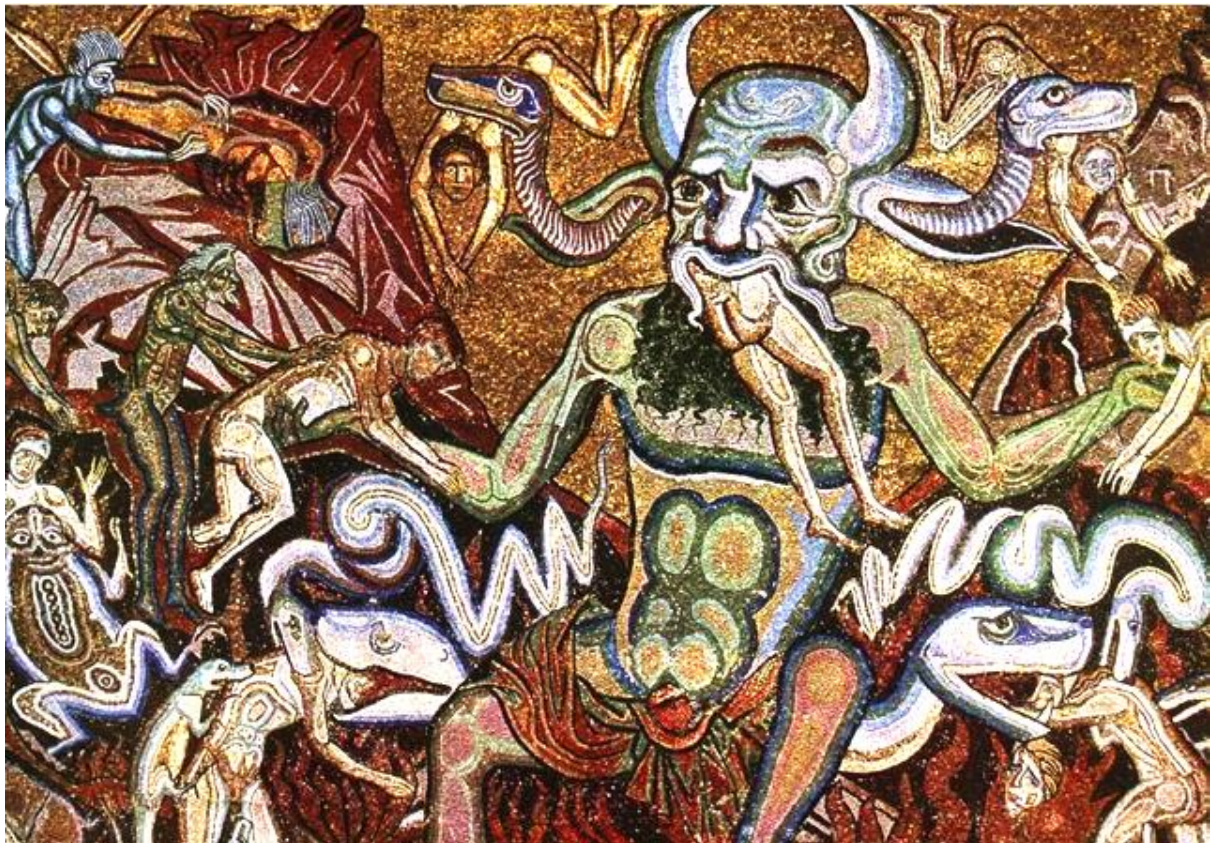
This practice also reflects the discomfort in Judean society regarding its demonic aspect. Stories of demons, divine beings, and Satan were quite common in antiquity. The case of the demon attacking the uncircumcised traveler was so widespread that it survived for many centuries, as evidenced by the *Nedarim* tractate in the Talmud (34a; 32a): "Rabbi Yehuda bar Bizna said: When our master Moses was circumcising himself, a demon arrived who swallowed his entire body, except for his feet. Sephora then took a stone and circumcised [Moses]." The Talmudic version further emphasizes the demonic aspect of circumcision.

Two Canaanite amulets meant to be worn around the neck were discovered in 1933 at the archaeological site of Arsalaan-Tach (Hadātu) in northern Syria. These amulets contain inscriptions and drawings dating back to the 7th century BCE, close to the time of the writing of Deuteronomy. One of the amulets depicts a hybrid creature: a human body with scorpion legs and a snake's head. The creature appears to be swallowing a man up to his genitals. The second amulet portrays a creature partially devouring a man, leaving only his legs outside of its mouth. These two amulets bear witness to the widespread practice and means of protection against demons. The scene of a demon devouring a man from head to genitals was so common that it inspired European artists of the 13th and 14th centuries, such as Coppo di Marcovaldo and Giotto di Bondone (The Day of Judgment). These ancient visual sources, along with Talmudic texts, reinforce the demonic interpretation of circumcision.

Based on these testimonies, current research suggests that Sephora's act was aimed at warding off demons that appeared in desolate or dangerous places and caused the death of uncircumcised men. The demonic narrative in Exodus also serves to distance divinity, specifically Yahweh, who wanted to kill Moses in the desert between Midian and the region of Goshen in Egypt. The practice of circumcision in this account is part of the traditions of the Exodus, Midian, and the Levites, rather than that of the Patriarchs and Judges-Saviors. It turns out to be an apotropaic act similar to the sacrifice of a lamb to appease demons and malevolent forces, a common practice in Western Asian cultures. This custom also recalls the ritual of lamb's blood applied to the doorposts of the Israelites' houses in Egypt to protect their firstborns (Exodus 12:7). Another mention links this act to a demon or a dangerous god that might harm travelers in the desert if they do not make a sacrifice. It can be found in the statement of the Israelites asking the Egyptian king to let them go: "Let us go, we pray, three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to Yahweh our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword." (Exodus 5:3). Thus, to avoid contracting illness or being harmed by a sword during their journey in the desert, the Israelites must offer a sacrifice to Yahweh.

The sentence "She conceived and gave birth to a son" appears 56 times in the books of the Bible. In all these cases, circumcision is never mentioned. The absence of mention of this symbolic act during the birth of a child is not accidental. The theological injunction in the cycle of stories about Abraham (Genesis 17, 9-13) was inserted into the narrative only at the end of the Persian period. It was only at this time that the act of circumcising a boy on the eighth day became a covenant between Yahweh and his people. This cycle emphasizes that the covenant with Yahweh applies to all members of the household, even those who are not part of the family, especially strangers and servants: "He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, any male among you, must be circumcised." (Genesis 17:12-13). It is notable that circumcision in this text is not at all linked to the covenant with Yahweh and is not based on ethnic criteria.

Throughout the entire royal period and much of the Persian period, the inhabitants of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah did not actually circumcise their sons. All the prophets in the Bible, such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah son of Amoz, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi, were never circumcised. The kings and priests weren't either. Despite this absence, in the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire, circumcision, dietary restrictions, and Sabbath observance became a way for the Judeans to distinguish themselves from other polytheistic peoples. One might wonder why the Judeans adopted this problematic and potentially dangerous act as a component of their identity. Why did circumcision remain essential later on when blood sacrifices of animals on altars were completely abandoned?



At the end of the royal period, the prophet Jeremiah does not mention the circumcision of newborns in Judah or the covenant with Yahweh: "Thus says the Lord: I will bring my judgments on all flesh, those who are circumcised and those who are not." (Jeremiah 9:24-25). Circumcision is mentioned negatively in this speech, and the prophet includes the Judeans alongside many circumcised peoples. Ezekiel mentions peoples who do not practice circumcision: Assyria, Elam, Meshech, Tubal, Edom, and Moab (Jeremiah 9:25-26). As for the Sidonians and the Canaanites, Ezekiel (32:30 and Genesis 34:14-30) preferred to include them among the uncircumcised, distancing them from the distinguished lineage of Shem, just like the Judeans, as well as Edom and Moab, who are also Semitic peoples.

The mention of "inhabitants of the desert" among the uncircumcised and the fact that the "bride price of blood" narrative in the Book of Exodus (Chapter 4) took place in Midian suggest that the Northern Arabs, the Midianites, and the Ishmaelites are Semites and also circumcised because they are related to the cycle of Abraham's stories: "Ishmael, Abraham's son, was circumcised at the age of thirteen, in the flesh of his foreskin." (Genesis 17:25). Circumcision is performed using a stone tool, indicating the antiquity of this practice. In the story of the rape of Dinah, Jacob's sons asked the men of Shechem, indigenous Canaanites, to circumcise themselves to seal a marriage covenant between them (Genesis 34). In both of these stories,

circumcision is applied to adults and not to newborns, and it is not linked to the covenant with Yahweh. These references show that even in the post-royal period, circumcision was not widespread and did not define ethnic identity.

Later, when this custom was reformed in the post-royal era, the scribes used the term "circumcision" as a ritual of purification rather than as a covenant with Yahweh, to distinguish the Israelites from the native Canaanites. The book of Joshua, written at that time, states that the Israelites born in Egypt were circumcised, while those born in the desert were not and had to be circumcised: "For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of Yahweh; to whom Yahweh had sworn that he would not let them see the land that Yahweh had promised to their fathers to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Joshua 5:6).

It is surprising to note that Deuteronomy rejects this practice. Its scribes from the circle of the scribe Shafan ben Atsalyahu questioned this demonic practice and proposed to replace it with "circumcision of the heart": "Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart" (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6). The meaning of this transformation is a theological rather than physical purification. This reform is an extension of the opposition of the prophets to blood sacrifices on altars to atone for sins. This book, written in the time of Josiah, does not mention the circumcision of newborns or the covenant with Yahweh. It suggests a rejection of the demonic aspect in favor of the moral and theological aspect of this act, as perceived by the reformist school of the scribe Shafan. Thus, the demonic aspect was abandoned in favor of moral reform.

In the Persian era, it is difficult to determine whether circumcision applied to newborns or adults. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 339-265), who quotes Philo of Alexandria (c. 140-65), describes circumcision as a hygienic procedure that promotes health, aids in procreation, and suppresses sexual desire. Herodotus (c. 425-484) also conceives of circumcision as a hygienic practice of Egyptian origin, widespread in Ethiopia and among the Phoenicians. According to him, the Phoenicians were the first to abandon it under Greek influence. Thanks to Hellenistic culture, the peoples of Western Asia abandoned this custom, but it was preserved primarily among the Jews.

The image of Judaism in Israel is now marked by a serious moral and religious deficiency. It is largely characterized by an increase in delinquency within the rabbinical world, leading to trials and prison sentences. Some charlatan mystics use practical Kabbalah, superstition, and magic to amass fortunes at the expense of socially vulnerable individuals. This current rabbinical Judaism has unfortunately not inherited the moral conception of the prophets or the authors of Deuteronomy. It did not dare to rid itself of this problematic practice and succumbed to popular beliefs. However, it struggled to adapt to biblical laws that were incompatible with its time and created new ones. Over the generations, the laws of the Talmud and the Shulchan Aruch were developed, which were more suitable for their times. As a result, halakha is a dynamic phenomenon that evolves in response to the reality of its time.

The current questioning of male circumcision lends moral legitimacy to the abandonment of this practice. Nowadays, more and more voices are raised to condemn the medical dangers that threaten newborns. Can contemporary Judaism be sensitive to public opinion and evolve with the times? Is it capable of making a halakhic decision to transform the circumcision of the foreskin into a moral covenant? In my opinion, Judaism cannot survive in a post-ethnic world unless its rabbis commit to revising this practice, as the Judeans once did by replacing animal sacrifice with prayer. It is not reasonable for the Jewish religion to be unable to evolve and adapt to the progress of its time. Although circumcision has become a symbol of Jewish identity, it is no longer conceivable that this practice should still be a factor of identity in Israel.

